Part of teaching children with reading problems is convincing them that they can learn to read, in spite of their experience to the contrary. (Stahl 1998, 183)

Throughout elementary school, Carol struggled unsuccessfully to learn to read. Now that she’s an adolescent she wants nothing to do with reading. “Why bother?” she thinks. “I’ll never learn to read, no matter how hard I try.”

Unfortunately, Carol’s pessimism about her ability to learn to read is characteristic of many children and adolescents who struggle with reading. Such negative beliefs adversely affect their motivation to read and often become the most powerful obstacle that teachers face in helping those students become better readers. To reverse these self-defeating beliefs, teachers must understand and directly address students’ self-efficacy doubts.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is the personal belief that students have about their ability to succeed at a particular task. Students who believe that they cannot learn to read despite making a considerable effort have low self-efficacy for reading; those who believe that they will become good readers if they make a modest effort have high self-efficacy for reading.

Students whose self-efficacy for reading is low often resist reading or apathetically go through the motions of learning to read. In contrast, the same students often exert considerable effort, tenacity, and discipline in activities they like and in which they feel self-efficacious, such as athletics or drawing.

Consistent with this, evidence suggests “that self-efficacious students participate more readily, work harder, persist longer, and have fewer adverse emotional reactions when they encounter difficulties than do those who doubt their capabilities” (Zimmerman 2000, 86). Thus, it is critical to help struggling readers develop an accurate belief that they can do well in reading if they make the effort to learn and apply what they are taught. Without such a self-efficacious attitude, students will make only minimal efforts to improve their reading, impeding progress and making learning an objectionable chore for themselves and their teachers, rather than an exciting opportunity.

An Informed, Persistent, Emotionally Supportive Effort

To help struggling readers become proficient, highly motivated readers, teachers must continuously work to help change students’ “can’t-do” attitudes about reading into “can-do” attitudes. Changing other people’s beliefs, especially those of adolescents who have struggled for years to learn to read, is difficult. Fortunately, difficult does not mean impossible. It does require that teachers be knowledgeable about self-efficacy and that they systematically stress self-efficacy whenever students read.

The literature on motivation and self-efficacy can be of great help in this endeavor. We present twenty-two practical suggestions gathered from the literature, each relatively easy to understand and implement. Each suggestion must be adapted to match the student’s age and maturity level. To maximize the benefits, the individual suggestions must be part of an informed, focused, systematic, persistent, emotionally supportive, and carefully monitored program that provides students with a wealth of successful reading experiences.

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Twenty-Two Suggestions

1. Use materials at the student’s proper instructional and comfort levels. When you work directly with students, use instructional materials on which they can independently recognize 95 percent of words in paragraph reading and answer 70 to 89 percent of comprehension questions. If you expect students to read homework assignments without professional assistance, assign independent-level materials on which they can recognize 99 percent of words in paragraph reading and correctly answer 90 percent of questions. When the aim of instruction is to improve the rate of reading, also use independent-level materials on which they can recognize 99 percent of the words in paragraphs. Avoid materials that students struggle with or that create palpable anxiety. Use moderately challenging materials that don’t provoke stress, ones for which students have the prerequisite skills and knowledge—materials at levels with which students are comfortable.

2. Think big, start small. Create expectations of success by giving students small, meaningful tasks that require only moderate effort to produce success. Select tasks that focus on important concepts that have wide applicability, such as recognizing commonly occurring words rather than infrequently occurring ones, or dividing words into syllables rather than memorizing the definitions of rarely occurring words. Gradually increase the difficulty and complexity of tasks to match improved ability levels. Keep in mind that students are far more motivated by goals that they perceive as moderately difficult and quickly achievable than by goals that they think are extremely difficult and beyond their reach (Schunk in press).

3. Start with tasks similar to those on which students achieved frequent success. Compare present tasks with ones on which students succeeded previously, or demonstrate to them how previously mastered strategies will produce success on the present task (e.g., “Watch me divide these words between the two same letters, just like you did yesterday with the words on page 34”). Incrementally introduce tasks that differ only slightly from activities on which the students achieved success.

4. Teach specific, step-by-step strategies. Show students how to use a simple, step-by-step strategy to achieve success on a specific type of task. Simultaneously describe what you are demonstrating, making each step explicit. For example, if students need to improve reading comprehension, demonstrate and describe the Paraphrasing Reading Strategy, or RAP: Read a paragraph, Ask yourself what the paragraph was about, Put the main idea and two details in your own words (Ellis 1996, 61–125). Explicitly tell the students that sticking to the strategy will improve their reading comprehension, which will benefit them in all their subjects and in daily life. Frequently review and practice the strategy with the students; encourage them to use it with tasks at their proper instructional level. If they get stuck, again explicitly demonstrate and explain how to use the strategy.

Avoid asking students questions designed to help them discover how and why they are to use the strategy. For struggling readers with little confidence in their reading abilities, inductive or heuristic questioning often creates confusion and anxiety, whereas explicitly showing and telling them the exact steps to take, in the exact order, increases confidence and reduces anxiety. Gradually introduce additional strategies after students have developed proficiency with the current strategy.

5. Provide students with frequent, immediate feedback and assistance when introducing something new. Use immediate, credible, task-relevant feedback to help students improve their performance. Be sure your feedback is sensitive, positive, and discreet. Avoid feedback that students might perceive as negative or embarrassing. Demonstrate anything that students find difficult. Decrease the level of material or the complexity of tasks if students need excessive feedback or assistance; that usually indicates that the tasks are too difficult for the students.

6. Provide multiple opportunities for supported and independent practice. Have students frequently practice newly acquired reading skills and strategies with independent- and instructional-level materials they find interesting. Match guidance to student proficiency. If you suspect that students might have some difficulty, make yourself available to provide whatever support and feedback are needed. As student responses become quick and accurate, stress independent rather than supported practice.

7. Provide moderate, competitive challenges. Have temporary teams of equal ability compete against one another in structured tournaments (see Slavin 1988). Match materials and tasks to students’ academic abilities. Before the competition begins, teach students how to succeed at the task and provide ample practice so they will accurately believe that they have a good chance of winning. Be sure that students view the competition as fair and emotionally safe.

8. Help students set and monitor realistic, short-term goals. Meet with students to set short-term goals that they believe are important and achievable. Help students choose realistic, task-appropriate criteria to minimize anxiety and resistance caused by unrealistic expectations—for example, 60 percent accuracy on a cloze assignment, or a 10 percent increase in the number of words read correctly after two repeated readings. Frequently meet with students to discuss their progress in meeting their goals. If they fall short of the mark, simultaneously demonstrate and describe simple strategies that can improve their performance.
9. Privately meet with students and listen carefully for their needs. Frequently engage students in brief, private conversations about topics that interest or concern them. Actively listen by to fully understand their views, concerns, fears, and aspirations by attending to the core message and paraphrasing without interruption. This can increase the willingness of students to engage in assigned activities, even if they believe themselves incapable of succeeding at the task.

10. Make students aware of their success. Frequently meet with individual students privately to review and chart their progress (e.g., the number of flash words mastered, the number of words accurately read in one minute of oral reading). Use visual displays such as bar graphs to emphasize progress. Review what they did that resulted in success—"the student persisted with a specific strategy"—and what they can do to better their performance—"Use the RAP strategy."

11. Help students focus on their achievements. Make statements that emphasize student successes, such as, "Your graphic organizer was great. It had all the critical information in the right places. You're really getting the hang of this." Ask questions that focus on accomplishments—for example, "How many checkmarks did you get for correctly using the vocabulary words in sentences?" These strategies help students develop the belief that they can succeed on specific tasks. They also teach struggling readers to focus on their successes rather than on their mistakes.

12. Employ self-attribution strategies. Make frequent comments to students that attribute their success with instructional and independent-level materials to their effort, persistence, and use of appropriate strategies (previewing, rereading, making comparisons to similarly spelled words). Ask students to verbalize the reasons for their success. Provide them with simple self-monitoring checklists that describe what they need to do to succeed on specific tasks.

13. Make encouraging comments and provide needed information. Provide timely, focused, encouraging comments to promote persistence with instructional or independent-level materials and tasks. Weave information that students need to overcome difficulty into the comments: for example, "Good job. You're on the right track. Just add one or two more boxes to the organizer." With materials and tasks at their proper instructional or independent levels, students can often correct errors or eliminate difficulties by investing slightly more effort and attention or by slightly modifying their strategy. Encouraging comments that provide important information can transform pessimistic mindsets into optimistic expectations. Be careful, however, not to repeatedly use encouraging comments with frustration-level materials and tasks. You lose credibility if you do this often.

14. Use student models. Have students observe models successfully engage in important reading behaviors that the students could succeed at with modest-to-moderate effort and practice. The models should be students who are similar to the observing students, have high status with them, and visibly enjoy the task. In addition, the models' reading levels should be equivalent to or slightly higher than the observing students. At times, however, low self-efficacy students benefit from observing coping models who succeed after minor difficulty (Schunk in press).

To increase the likelihood that the observing students will emulate the models, (a) give the models immediate reinforcement for targeted behaviors, (b) have the models describe what they are doing or thinking, (c) prompt and reinforce the observing students for closer approximations of the modeled behavior.

15. Have models verbalize rules and strategies. While models engage in a task, have them verbalize the specific rules and strategies they are using to succeed at the task. Encourage observing students to paraphrase the same task-specific rules and strategies; reinforce accurate paraphrasing. Low self-efficacy students may need several practice and role-playing sessions to readily paraphrase task-specific rules and strategies. Before modeling, the models may need to discuss and rehearse what they're going to say, to make it clear.

16. Help students understand the value of tasks. Assign tasks that students immediately recognize as interesting or valuable, such as reading about movies they want to see or reading instructions to download songs from the Internet. If the benefits are not immediately apparent, discuss with students how success in the tasks will benefit them.

17. Provide external reinforcement for undervalued tasks. Provide powerful extrinsic reinforcers to students shortly after they've successfully completed a task that aroused feelings of inadequacy or which they viewed as unattractive. Use only actual reinforcers—items, activities, or privileges that students would readily work to obtain. Keep in mind that reinforcers are highly individualistic; teacher praise, time to listen to a favorite CD, or a few minutes to socialize are powerful reinforcers for some adolescents but not others. Over time, commensurate with student success and positive perceptions of assignments, gradually reduce the frequency of extrinsic reinforcement. Ultimately, the aim is to eliminate the need for it.
18. Surround students with other students who value learning. Often, other students exert far more influence on a student’s behavior and attitudes than do adults (Steinberg 1997). Consequently, struggling readers, with low self-efficacy about reading, need to be regularly involved in lively, meaningful discussions with good readers whom they respect and who value reading. One way to prepare struggling readers for such discussions is to read relevant materials aloud to them and discuss the materials with them a day or so before the joint discussion. Resource room instruction offers a good opportunity to do this. Another way is to highlight small, manageable portions of the materials and focus part of the joint discussion on the highlighted portions. A third way is to provide struggling readers with reading materials relevant to the discussion, at their instructional level.

19. Give low self-efficacy students opportunities to read to other students. Assess the willingness of low self-efficacy readers to read materials they have mastered to less-proficient readers. If reading in front of others provokes anxiety, see if they are willing to make audiotapes. Reading, rehearsing, and putting on a play they select or create also provide opportunities for struggling readers to excel if they are given ample support, practice, and time to learn the material. Role-plays can serve the same function, with less work. The activities have the added benefit of repeated practice with the same materials, which increases reading fluency and in-depth comprehension.

20. Have students engage in paired reading with a supportive adult. Paired reading (see Topping 1987, 1988, 1995) is a strategy for practicing reading in which a student and an adult simultaneously read aloud from a book or other material that the student has selected. The adult stops reading aloud at the student’s signal to stop and begins reading aloud again with the student if the student makes an oral reading error. Paired reading gives aides and volunteer tutors an effective strategy for improving students’ reading that is relatively easy to use and monitor and does not require teaching students new words or concepts.

By providing aides and volunteer tutors with instruction in paired reading and having them use the method with low self-efficacy readers, you can individualize instruction for these students while providing them with extensive opportunity to succeed in front of others. For paired reading to be successful, it’s important that students select books and other materials they can read successfully and that the aides or tutors fully understand the paired reading process and the need for them to make frequent, emotionally supportive, well-justified comments. In such situations, paired reading can be a highly therapeutic, confidence-building experience.

21. Directly reduce anticipated anxiety. Schedule a pleasing nonacademic activity or brief relaxation exercise (e.g., progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing exercises; see Margolis 1990) immediately before any task that might provoke anxiety. Follow up successful task completion with a brief nonacademic activity that students find enjoyable. Together, these strategies balance the tendency of students to base self-efficacy judgments on perceived physiological reactions.

22. Capitalize on an interest each and every day. Listen carefully to students to learn about their interests. Each day, use this information to provide students with at least one reading activity about a subject that matters to them. If students’ reading levels are far less mature than their interests, read aloud to them. Reading moderately challenging materials to students, on subjects they find interesting, engages them intellectually and fosters willingness to try new activities. This willingness is essential for overcoming low self-efficacy.

Some Students Need More

Although the twenty-two recommendations in this article are practical and educationally sound, they are not infallible. To different degrees, the recommendations will benefit many youth and adolescents with low self-efficacy for reading, who have struggled for years to learn to read. But by themselves, they will not work for all students. Some students simply need more.

Some students will need daily counseling, daily tutoring in reading, compensatory strategy instruction, assistive technology, or a combination of those. Others will need specialized programs that focus on rebuilding self-concept and teaching basic academic skills in a coordinated fashion throughout the day. Still others will need a combined in-school and community-based educational program that focuses on their interests and temporarily minimizes reading demands.

Whatever the environment, whatever the instructional emphasis, it is necessary to change low self-efficacy “can’t-do” attitudes into realistic “can-do” attitudes. Without a positive, optimistic belief that they can become good readers, students are unlikely to make the effort required for success. With a strong self-perception and a quality reading program geared to their needs, the probability that students will become good readers increases dramatically.

Key words: students, reading skills, self-efficacy, success

REFERENCES


